

Mark 1:35-39 Bible Commentary | The Importance of Solitude

[A Bible Study of Mark 1:35-39](#)

There is something strange about what Jesus does in Mark 1:35.

He has just had the most successful night of his public ministry. The whole town of Capernaum showed up at Peter's door. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. People were amazed. By any human measure, the momentum was real, and the opportunity was obvious.

And then he disappeared.

Before the sun came up, while it was still dark, Jesus slipped away from the house and went off by himself to pray. No crowd. No disciples. No momentum to capitalize on. Just Jesus, alone with his Father, in what Mark calls a "solitary place."

When Peter and the others finally tracked him down, they were not exactly pleased. The Greek word Mark uses for their search carries a hostile edge. Some translations render it as "hunted for him" or "searched frantically for him." Their message when they found him was urgent: "Everyone is looking for you!"

And Jesus essentially said, "I know. Let's go somewhere else."

This short passage, just five verses, raises three questions worth sitting with. What changes when we stop to be alone with God? Is it possible to love Jesus and yet work against what he is doing? And what is Jesus actually here to do?

Mark 1:35 // What Changes When We Stop to Be Alone With God?

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

The word Mark uses for "solitary place" is the Greek word *eremos*. It is the same word used earlier in Mark 1 to describe the wilderness where John the Baptist preached and where the Spirit drove Jesus to be tempted. Scholar James R. Edwards notes, "The word does not

connote a desert waste but, reflecting Israel's sojourn in the wilderness following the Exodus, a place of repentance, restoration, and fellowship with God."¹

When Jesus goes to the wilderness, eremos, to pray, Mark is not just telling us where Jesus went. He is telling us why. The wilderness, throughout all of Scripture, is where God meets his people.

Think about Israel wandering for forty years after the Exodus. It was a place of punishment, yes, but also a place where God fed them, guided them with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day, and shaped them into his people. Isaiah 63 looks back on that season and says that even in the desolation, God set his Holy Spirit among them and gave them rest.

Isaiah 63:11, 14 (NIV)

Then his people recalled the days of old,
the days of Moses and his people—
where is he who brought them through the sea,
with the shepherd of his flock?
Where is he who set
his Holy Spirit among them...
like cattle that go down to the plain,
they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord.
This is how you guided your people
to make for yourself a glorious name.

God meets people in the wilderness.

So when Jesus, fresh off a night of extraordinary ministry, chooses to go out alone before dawn, he is not retreating from his work. He is returning to the source of life.

This is worth pausing on. Jesus was fully God and fully human. Mark 5:30 tells us that when a woman touched the hem of his garment, power went out from him. Healing cost him something. Ministry was draining. And if the Son of God built a rhythm of solitude into his life between seasons of ministry, that says something significant about our own need for the same.

Mark shows us this pattern three times in his Gospel. In Mark 1:35, Jesus withdraws after healing in Capernaum and before more preaching and exorcisms. In Mark 6:45-46, he dismisses a crowd of five thousand and goes up a mountainside to pray before walking on water. In Mark 14:32, he goes to Gethsemane to pray after predicting Peter's denial and before his trial and crucifixion. Each time, solitude finds a space in the middle of demanding ministry moments.

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 65.

John 15:5 puts it plainly. Jesus tells his disciples, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Solitude is not a luxury for people with extra time. It is the condition under which we stay connected to the vine.

Martin Luther, who led the Protestant Reformation, is reported to have said that he had so much to do that he could not afford to spend less than three hours in prayer each day. The busier the season, the more he needed it. Most of us, if we are honest, fill the equivalent hours with our phones. We scroll.

The invitation here is not guilt. It is reorientation. What would change if you carved out even a few minutes of genuine quiet with God each day? Not as a productivity strategy. Not to optimize your morning routine. But simply because you want to know Jesus.

Mark 1:36-37 // Are You Following Jesus, or Are You Trying to Steer Him?

Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

When Peter and the disciples track Jesus down that morning, their message sounds reasonable enough. Everyone is looking for you. The crowd is ready. The momentum is there. Come back and keep going.

But look at what Jesus had just been doing. He had been praying. Alone. With his Father. Realigning himself to his mission. And now Peter shows up to redirect him back to what Peter thought the mission should look like.

Notice the reversal happening in these two verses. Back in Mark 1:16-18, Jesus sought out Simon. He found him casting nets into the sea and called him to follow. Jesus was the one doing the seeking and the directing. Now Simon is doing the seeking, and when he finds Jesus, he is the one trying to give direction.

This is not the last time Peter does this. In Mark 8, after Jesus predicts his suffering and death, Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him. Jesus responds with some of the most jarring words in the Gospels: "Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

That is a striking escalation from "everyone is looking for you." But the pattern is the same. Peter loves Jesus. Peter is enthusiastic about Jesus. And Peter keeps trying to steer Jesus toward the outcomes Peter thinks make sense.

Scholar R.T. France describes it this way. "It is not just that [Jesus] is one step ahead of them; his whole conception of how God's kingship is to be made effective is quite different from theirs. While they would naturally pursue the normal human policy of taking advantage of popularity

and building on success on their own home ground, following Jesus will increasingly involve them in having to learn a new orientation.”²

Jesus and the disciples are not simply operating with different tactics. Their entire conception of how God's work gets done is different. The disciples default to the normal human approach: capitalize on popularity, build on success, stay where the momentum is. But following Jesus, will increasingly require they head a new direction—following after Jesus.

That is a convicting observation for anyone who has been a Christian long enough to get enthusiastic about ministry.

There is a pattern we risk falling into. It starts with genuine submission to Jesus. Then it becomes enthusiasm for Jesus. And then, almost without noticing, it can become redirection of Jesus. We start using his name to validate what we already wanted to do. We build platforms in his name. We attach his endorsement to our agendas. We tell ourselves it is for his glory.

Peter was not a villain. He was a man who genuinely loved Jesus and genuinely got it wrong. His story should give us both comfort and caution. Comfort because Peter was transformed. He went on to preach one of the greatest sermons in history at Pentecost, fully empowered by the Spirit he had learned to wait for. Caution because transformation required him to stop trying to run the show.

The question the text puts to each of us is simple. Are you following Jesus, or are you trying to steer him?

Solitude is one of the primary ways we answer that question. When we stop, get alone, and bring our plans and ambitions before God rather than asking God to bless what we have already decided, we open ourselves to the reorientation Jesus is always inviting us into.

Mark 1:38-39 // What Is Jesus Actually Here to Do?

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else, to the nearby villages, so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

When Jesus responds to Peter's pressure, he does not debate him. He does not negotiate with the crowd's expectations. He simply states his mission and moves forward.

Jesus came to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Mark 1:14-15 say, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" But it would be a mistake to reduce Jesus' mission to pulpit preaching in the way we typically picture it.

² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002), 111

Luke 4:18-19 gives us a fuller picture. Jesus opens the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue and reads a kind of mission statement.

Luke 4:18-19 (NIV)

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Isaiah 61, the passage Jesus is quoting, expands this further: comfort for the grieving, beauty instead of ashes, joy instead of mourning, ancient ruins rebuilt, ruined cities renewed, shame replaced with honor.

This is not a narrow mission. It is a cosmic one. Jesus came to announce and embody the full restoration of everything sin and death have broken. God forgives sinners. Demons are cast out. The sick are healed. The whole cosmos will be set right.

That is the mission we are invited to join—but only in relationship with the Father.

And here is what ties all three sections of this passage together. Solitude is not the opposite of mission. Solitude with God makes ministry fruit possible. Jesus went to the solitary to spend time with the Father. This withdrawal is necessary before any sort of advancement. Jesus stopped, and ultimately, God called him forward.

The same is true for us. If we never stop to be alone with God, we will eventually stop following Jesus and start steering him. We will shrink his mission down to what we can manage and understand. We will mistake our own enthusiasm for his direction.

But if we build solitude into the rhythm of our lives, not as a spiritual performance but as a genuine desire to know God, something begins to shift. We start to see what he sees. We start to want what he wants. We find ourselves participating, in small and ordinary ways, in the restoration of what sin has broken.

Three Invitations From Mark 1:35-39

Let’s review three invitations from Mark 1:35-39. The first comes in verse 35. Jesus invites us to a solitary place. Not necessarily a geographic location, but that can be helpful. But a posture of stopping, quieting, and being with the Father in a way that reorients everything else.

The second invitation comes in verses 36-37. Peter’s reaction invites us to learn a new orientation. To notice when we have drifted from following Jesus into steering him. So we bring this before God in the solitary place and ask for the realignment only he can provide.

The third invitation comes in verses 38-39. Jesus invites us into his mission. Not a narrow version of it, but the full scope of it. The gospel of the kingdom that brings freedom, restoration, comfort, and renewal to every broken thing. While Jesus' mission is not exclusive to preaching—announcing God's kingdom is an essential part of God's cosmic restoration.

These three invitations belong together. We cannot sustain the mission without the solitude. We cannot maintain the right orientation without regularly returning to the place where Jesus is waiting. Our response is simple. Come and spend time with the Father in a solitary place.

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Discussion Questions

1. When you've stopped to be alone with God, what made it easy or hard?
2. In what areas of your life might you be steering Jesus rather than following him?
3. How might Jesus' prayer pattern in Mark's Gospel challenge our own approach to busy seasons?
4. What does the full scope of Jesus' mission in Mark 1, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4 change about how you think about the gospel?
5. What would it look like practically for you to build solitude into your weekly rhythm?
6. How can our community join Jesus' mission of restoration together?

Resources

- Watch our [Mark 1:35-39 Bible Study Together](#) video.
- Watch the full Bible Study Together through [Mark podcast](#).
- Download the slide deck for your small group: theology-together.kit.com/mark1.35-39
- Mark for You by Jason Meyer (affiliate link): <https://amzn.to/4iNEji0>
- Mark for Everyone by N.T. Wright (affiliate link): <https://amzn.to/3OtrUGZ>